

ADVOCACY AGENDA



Jessica Rosenworcel

Connecting Students at School and at Home

BY JESSICA ROSENWORCEL

Both at school and at home, broadband and connected devices are changing every aspect of our lives. In schools, the teaching tools so many of us knew in class years ago—from the blackboard to the bulky textbook—are no longer the only essential instruments of education.

That's why when I became a commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), one of my first priorities was to look under the hood of our E-Rate program to make sure that it was turbo-charged for 21st-century education.

E-Rate is the nation's largest education technology program. It helps schools and libraries by supporting access to modern communications and the Internet. Thanks to E-Rate, more than 95 percent of classrooms in this country are connected to the Internet.

The challenge today is no longer connection—it's capacity. With this in mind, we rolled up our sleeves to reboot the E-Rate program. We streamlined the application process, refocused the program on capacity, and updated the program budget to break it out of the dial-up era. This effort was greatly assisted by the real feedback that we received from educators and their representatives.

The E-Rate reboot is already making an impact. For the first time in years, we are supporting connectivity inside the classroom, providing more than \$1.5 billion for Wi-Fi in classrooms. This work represents real progress in Washington.

But our work is not done. Learning in the classroom is only part of the equation in today's education environment. If kids are connected at

school but disconnected at home, they fall into what I call the "Homework Gap."

Today, roughly 7 in 10 teachers assign homework that requires access to the Internet. But data from the FCC suggests that as many as 1 in 3 households do not subscribe to broadband, due to lack of affordability and lack of interest. Where these figures overlap is the Homework Gap.

The Homework Gap is real. In fact, according to findings from the Pew Research Center, there are 29 million households with school-aged children nationwide. Five million of them lack regular access to broadband.

The Homework Gap is hurting children. According to a recent study, nearly 50 percent of students say they have been unable to complete a homework assignment because they didn't have access to the Internet or a computer. On top of that, 42 percent of students say they received a lower grade on an assignment because they didn't have access to the Internet.

Try to imagine what it is like to be a student in one of these households. Just getting homework done is hard. Trying to research a paper is tough. Instructional videos and online educational programs are out of reach. The daily challenge of getting schoolwork done is compounded by a quest for connectivity. The Homework Gap is a problem for these students. But it's also a problem for all of us, because this gap harms our shared economic future.

So, what can we do? From my seat at the FCC, there are a couple of places to start to close the Homework Gap.

First, we are studying ways to improve a program known as Lifeline. This program, which helps provide telephone access to low-income households, got its start in 1985, when most calls involved a cord. We should modernize it and give it a digital age reboot. We can make simple changes to include broadband as a choice in this program and help bring the Internet to more low-income households with school-aged children.

Second, we need more Wi-Fi. After all, Wi-Fi is an essential on-ramp for Internet connectivity. More than half of us online have relied on public Wi-Fi at some point. But for many low-income students, public Wi-Fi is their only means of getting online. So, having more Wi-Fi in more places will mean more opportunities for students to get their homework done. Efforts from around the country make this clear—cities offering wireless hotspots at libraries, schools identifying community or business Wi-Fi locations for students, and even school buses

equipped with routers to help with access for homework on the way to school and back. We need to multiply these kinds of efforts and make sure that they have the spectrum necessary for Wi-Fi that helps them flourish.

The Homework Gap is the cruelest part of our new digital divide. But if we are creative, we can find ways to bridge it, close it, and make it possible for students to have the opportunity to succeed. ■

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